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Rea, Naomi: *Bridget Riley Is Still Pushing the Limits at 92, Realizing Her Enchanting, First-Ever Ceiling Painting in Rome*

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Art World

Bridget Riley Is Still Pushing the Limits at 92, Realizing Her Enchanting, First-Ever Ceiling Painting in Rome

'Verve,' as the mural is called, is a work of precision and grandeur.



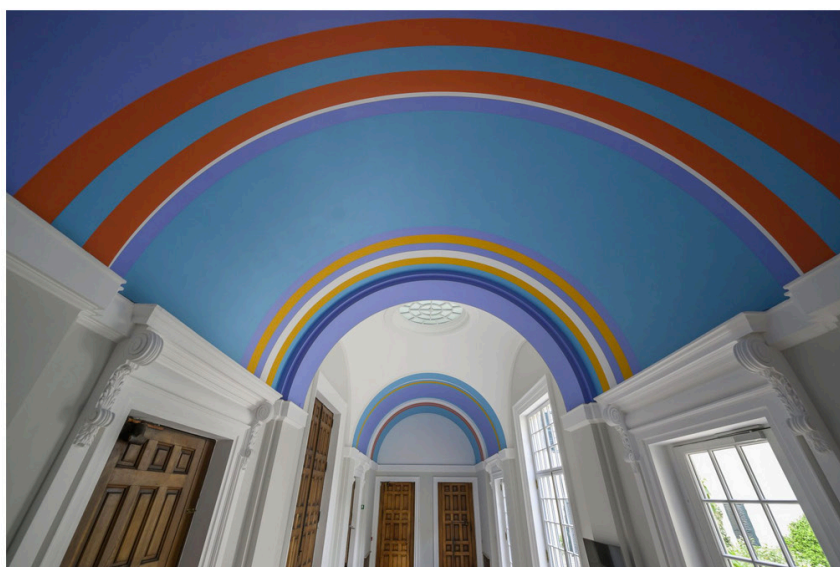
Bridget Riley with Verve at the British School at Rome, Italy. Photo by Antonio Masiello/Getty Images.

On an early May evening in Rome, Italy, just as the azaleas were beginning to open on the city's famous Spanish steps, a red carpet was being rolled down another set of steps overlooking the Villa Borghese gardens in honor of the British artist Bridget Riley.

The celebrated painter was unveiling a colorful ceiling painting on the vaulted roof of the British School at Rome, one of the city's hallowed educational institutions, and an assembly of Rome's intelligentsia and British expatriates had dutifully gathered to take it in.

The 92-year-old Op Art painter is known for her geometric patterns, lines, and color arrangements, often appearing in wall paintings and dizzying works on canvas. But this work, titled *Verve*, is Riley's first-ever ceiling painting. I located her at the opening party, perched beneath it on a bench, her diminutive figure not immediately obvious among the circulating spritzes and cucumber sandwiches. Still, she was full of unmistakable verve herself.

Riley explained that she had initially been reluctant to take on the ceiling. The work had begun its life as a wall painting in another room but did not end up being suitable for the space, and she had been concerned about losing the "intimacy" of looking at the work face-to-face. Yet as our eyes traveled rhythmically over the steep arch of the ceiling, I felt her ribbons of color enveloping me in a hug.



A general view shows the ceiling painting by Bridget Riley, on May 3, 2023 at the British School at Rome in Rome, Italy. Photo by Antonio Masiello/Getty Images.

As I congratulated her on the triumph of joining the table of artists from Michelangelo to Caravaggio whose work causes tourists to crane their necks at the city's important buildings, she mentioned that she was excited to visit the Vatican the following day to see Raphael's *School of Athens*. It clicked for me that her abstract dance with perspective finds its own origins in the Renaissance painters' mastery of linear perspective.

Tackling the ceiling of the British School at Rome was a complex process requiring the delivery of life-sized casts of Edwin Lutyens-designed interior to Riley's East London studio, so that she could study the imperfections of the barrel vaults and its tricky cornices, to ensure a work with clean lines and no awkward shadows. To achieve the laser-beam precision of the hand-painted lines in the finished work, three studio assistants worked on it for three weeks.

In a statement about the work, Riley acknowledged the process as "an exhilarating visual chase" and a "perceptual adventure." In the end, she says she is delighted by the result.



A detail of the ceiling painting by Bridget Riley is seen at the British School at Rome, on May 3, 2023, in Rome, Italy. (Photo by Antonio Masiello/Getty Images)

The colors around us conformed to Riley's famed "Egyptian" palette of turquoise, blue, red, yellow, green, black, and white, which she has been working with since being inspired by a visit to the Egyptian tombs in 1979. She was struck by the Ancient Egyptians' use of this fixed palette across thousands of years. "In each and every usage these colors appeared different but at the same time they united the appearance of the entire culture," she once said.

She made her first environmental wall painting in 1983 at the Royal Liverpool Hospital using the same palette. Now, some 40 years later, she is unafraid to explore new contexts, and take it to literal new heights.

"Looking up, the color of the skies offers a glimpse of nature in her most promising and serene mood," she told me. As I descended the steps at the end of the evening, under a pink twilight and indigo swirls illuminated by a full, white, moon, I couldn't help but agree.

Bridget Riley's Verve is on view at the British School at Rome. It will be open to the public once a month by appointment beginning on May 25, and can also be seen during the school's regular Wednesday evening events program, which is free and open to the public.